What a week it has been! On Monday morning, the *CT Post* reported, “Fairfield University is on top.” They were referring of course to the *US News and World Report* annual college ranking, which named Fairfield University #1 out of 196 master’s comprehensive universities in the North.

Those of you who follow the college rankings know that *US News & World Report* is the oldest and most recognized of the American ranking systems, and that while Fairfield University often performs well in this ranking - in the top three to five in recent years – before now, the number one spot has eluded us. So, Fairfield University – we begin the 2018-2019 academic year “on top,” “number 1,” for the first time in rankings history.

As is the case every year, the University actually received the embargoed *US News & World Report* rankings last week. Having this information days before it was public, allowed President Nemec and me the opportunity for on-going conversation around different iterations of what was essentially the same question – What do you when you are #1? We know what to do when we are tied for third – we’ve been there – we analyze the data, look for evidence of where we can report it as a win, and consider those areas in which we need to improve.

But what you do when you are #1?
Do we seize the marketing opportunity, as if we won an NCAA sports championship? Print even more red black t-shirts emblazoned with depictions of male deer with large #1’s in their antlers?

If not swag rights, do we capitalize on the bragging rights, taking every opportunity to diminish our near (and far) competitors?

More concerning, do we simply rest on our laurels? Claim that we clearly doing it all right, falsely assume security, and settle into complacency?

Or equally problematic, do we refuse to acknowledge what such an achievement might mean by feigning false modesty – “we can’t imagine how this happened” – or dismissing the legitimacy of the recognition – “everyone knows those rankings are rigged?”

I suggest that in the Jesuit tradition, we embrace the opportunity for discernment – and engage individually and collectively in reflection. How do we come to be where we are? What does it mean to be here? What is the path forward?

**How did we get here?** The short answer, based on analysis of the rankings data by our colleagues in Institutional Research, is that
• the selectivity of the students we admit has improved, with higher test scores for those
  who submit them and more incoming students being ranked in the top 25% of their
class;
• our faculty resources remain strong with a 12:1 faculty to student ratio, a high
  proportion of full-time faculty and nearly all of our faculty holding terminal degrees in
  their fields;
• our student outcomes – first to second year retention rates, graduation rates, and
  student employment rates - are well above national averages and continually improving;
• our alumni giving is up;
• and our results on assessments by peer institutions and high school guidance counselor
  are improved over previous years.

The more complete response is that this year’s ranking represents several years of steady,
consistent and deliberate work, on the part of many members of the University, but most
especially the faculty.

Admitted students: Faculty on the Admissions and Scholarship Committee repeatedly advocate
for higher admission stands. While our colleagues in admissions work to bring us the best and
brightest students each year, you - the faculty - have been instrumental in helping those
students choose Fairfield University. We often hear from students and families that positive
interactions with professors during the admissions process – open houses, admitted student
days, and orientation – contribute to their decision to attend Fairfield. Our recent increased
efforts to have faculty participate in yield events coupled with the revision and expansion of the University honors program are initiatives designed to ensure that the quality of our admitted students continues to rise.

Faculty resources: Your efforts over years also ensures that these highly qualified students are met by a highly qualified faculty. As we have worked on core revision, new program development, and innovative pedagogies you have continuously advocated for full-time faculty lines to support these curricular initiatives, and today we welcome over 30 of those colleagues in new roles. Those of you who serve on faculty search committees dedicate your time and energy to the complete vetting of candidates, at times facing the difficult decision of a choice between many highly qualified applicants for a full-time position and loyalty to long-standing adjunct colleagues, allowing your commitment to excellene above all else prevail. For this reason, not only are we #1 overall, but we also tied for fourth in Best Undergraduate Teaching.

Student Outcomes: And when year after year talented students meet dedicated faculty, the outcomes follow. For the first time last year, our first to second year retention rate topped 90% and we are on track for a similar showing this year. Compared to other institutions in our class, Fairfield University students are more likely to complete their undergraduate degree within 4 to 6 years, and to go on to full-time employment, graduate school or volunteer service within six months of graduation. Our students stay with us, complete their education and are prepared to be thriving and contributing members of society because of the ways in which you - the faculty - advise them, instruct them, and mentor them through scholarly work, research projects,
community service, and internship experiences. Outcomes like these also contributed to a recent Money Magazine ranking that placed Fairfield University seventh in the nation for most transformative schools.

Alumni giving: In response and gratitude, alumni of Fairfield University are acknowledging the value of their education and experiences by giving back. As our comprehensive campaign comes to an end, alumni giving is at an all-time high.

Peer assessment: And it’s not just our alumni who are responding to the transformations at Fairfield. High school counselors as well as Admissions Officers, Presidents and Provosts at other colleges and universities are noticing. Their ratings of Fairfield University are also at an all-time high, contributing not only to our number #1 ranking but also to our recognition as fifth in the category of Most Innovative Schools.

So, how did we get to #1? Through quality students, talented faculty, strong outcomes, and alumni and peer recognition.

**What does it mean?** The numbers – 1 (among regional universities in the North), 4 (for best undergraduate teaching), 5 (for most innovative), 7 (for transformative) are not what give meaning to our work. Rather, as we fully engage in work that is important, work for which we have passion, work that is fulfilling – we, our students, and our University flourish, and it is in the flourishing that we find meaning.
In his address to the new faculty on August 29th, Fr. Gerry Blaszczak, SJ, Vice President for Mission and Identity, described the purpose of Jesuit higher education as contributing to human flourishing. He further went on to say that as the number of Jesuit priests declines, the future of Fairfield depends on lay leaders, lay faculty and lay staff who can embrace and connect with the Jesuit mission and identity in ways that allow them to flourish, with flourishing meaning “to grow or develop in a healthy or vigorous way, especially as the result of a particularly favorable environment.”

“To grow”- In making the decision to be a member of the General Faculty at Fairfield University (whether it’s your 1st year or your 51st year – shout out to Dorothea Braginsky) you acknowledge the centrality of student learning to our mission, and so we all are consistently committed to student growth. Central to the President’s vision of Fairfield as the Modern Jesuit Catholic University is a strategy for institutional growth – and indeed we will be hearing from him and talking more about that growth over the coming year. And as your Provost, I am also committed to your personal and professional growth, knowing that student growth and institutional growth depend on a healthy and vigorous faculty.

The Provost Office’s has been restructured this year to support you and your Deans in your growth; together with the Center for Academic Excellence and the Office of Mission and Identity, the Office of the Provost has reconfigured our new faculty orientation programs and debuted a Faculty Engagement Forum that we hope will become an annual event; additional funds have been allocated in this year’s budget to support faculty research and scholarly work;
and as we prepare to implement the new *Magis* Core Curriculum, a host of faculty development opportunities, supported by private donations and foundation grants, are underway. These are just a few examples of the ways in which I have begun and will continue throughout this year to celebrate, encourage, and champion faculty engagement in meaningful work. It is not in the rankings, but in the work that we find meaning.

“*Especially as the result of a particularly favorable environment*” – I have invited the Academic Deans to join me in this pursuit of meaningful work as together we articulate clear purpose statements for the academic division and each of its units.

The President has identified a purpose for Fairfield to be the modern Jesuit Catholic University – one that is values-based, student centered, and outcomes focused in its commitment to lifelong learning, holistic formation, and expansive partnerships. Throughout last year, I worked with President Nemec and with you to define modern excellence in academics as characterized in part by heroic leaders; and much of our collective effort last year focused on putting a solid academic leadership team in place.

I am honored to have been named your Provost, and welcome colleagues to new roles in my Office. We also begin this year two new Deans – in Business and Engineering - and a cadre of new Associate Deans. With these heroic leaders in place, we extend the work of defining modern excellence to each academic unit. You will be hearing more from me and your Deans throughout the year as they further develop their visions and purposes for the College, the
Schools and the Library. Specific strategic planning initiatives are taking place the College, in Dolan and in the Library. The Deans will be presenting early drafts of their purpose statements to the Board of Trustees at the end of September, and highlighting for them the ways in which faculty at Fairfield live out that purpose.

So how did we get to #1? Through consistent and deliberate work, and it is in the work, not the rankings, that we find meaning, driven by purpose and enacted through strategy.

**What is the path forward?** In many ways this final question takes us back full circle back to the original - what do you do when you are #1?

Although we don’t work for the rankings, or derive our meaning and value from them, we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge that Fairfield University has been recognized – not just by *US News & World Report* and the *CT Post* – but also by other ranking agencies; by our Regional accreditor with high marks from NEASC last year as we bid for re-accreditation; repeatedly by our professional associations – the Egan School’s designation as a Center for Excellence by the National League for Nursing as just the most recent example; and by funding agencies, with awards last year including nearly $500,000 from the National Science Foundation and $250,000 from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

At a time when higher education is under increased scrutiny and its value questioned, resulting in enrollment and financial insecurities for many institutions, Fairfield University by all
indicators is thriving, and as such we are privileged. When we recognize that it is a privilege—not a marketing moment, not an invitation to brag, not excuse to be complacent or dismissive—but a privilege to be #1, then we at Fairfield University know what to do. Because as we know, with privilege comes responsibility. We have a responsibility to our students to continually up our game in order to provide them with the highest quality education; we have a responsibility to bring that quality education to those students who we are not yet serving as we expand our reach nationally, globally, and across age-ranges; and we have a responsibility to lead—to demonstrate that there is value in higher education and the way we do it here at Fairfield University.

In the past two weeks, as I have encountered faculty at opening of the year events, in the hallways, in the BCC and faculty dining room, and in my office and we have discussed and made observations about the start of the new academic year, many of you have asked me about what I see as upcoming challenges. With generosity, that question has come in the form of “What is the biggest challenge you are facing, Christine, and how can we help?” with a mix of curiosity and anxiety, that question has also come in the form of “What’s on the horizon, Christine, and where do you see us going?” and rarely but occasionally with provocativeness, that question has come in the form of “Christine, what are you going to do about [insert some Workday or budget challenge here]?"

Although the challenges we face may manifest in ways specific to our University’s context, the type and nature of challenges we currently encounter are not unique to Fairfield. They are
common across higher education. From the privileged position of a thriving University, then, we have a responsibility to take them on and strive for solutions that will not only serve our institution but serve as a model to lead the way for others. This is what the President calls on us to do when he asks the we become THE modern Jesuit Catholic University.

Whether born from generosity, curiosity, anxiety or provocativeness, I welcome your questions. In response, I can tell you that the challenges I see as currently plaguing higher education include (1) demonstrating ROI or value of a college degree, (2) recognizing that higher education (like it or not) is a business and identifying sustainable business models for growth while containing costs, (3) addressing issues of free-expression in a democratic society, and (4) for those of us in Catholic higher education – supporting Universities as places of reconciliation.

We in academics at Fairfield will take on these challenges this year, under my and the Dean’s leadership and with your- the faculty’s - engagement, as we specifically:

1. **prepare to roll-out a new core curriculum for the first time in 40 years.** Through tireless efforts and shared governance processes last year, you approved the requirements for our *Magis* Core Curriculum to begin in fall of 2019. Heroic curriculum development and course approval initiatives are already well underway. We have not as of yet, however, determined exactly how we will assess and demonstrate the impact of this new core – which is work we will undertake this year. Our solutions to that, as well as our efforts to implement a new honors program, revitalize our IRC initiative, increase internship opportunities for students in the College, and expand our global education experiences
– can and will contribute to larger conversations about the value of a humanistic liberal-arts based undergraduate degree.

2. **address questions of faculty labor as they relate to the distribution of tenure and non-tenure track professors within programs, schools and across the General Faculty; the identification of processes for the advancement of non-tenure track faculty; and associated implications for shared governance.** I fully recognize that although the incoming class of faculty represents our biggest in years, it also contains the largest number of visiting instructors and professors of the practice that we have ever seen. After years of leadership transition, we find ourselves at a point of faculty transition. Just as we successfully weathered our way through series of interim administrators, I am confident that we can and we will find our way through this inflection point in faculty distribution. My goal would be that we do so in a way that positively contributes to the larger conversation about the business of higher education. And to those of you among us who find yourselves either for the first year or for a returning year in a position that is full-time but feels in some ways to be temporary, I of all people can tell you that at Fairfield our “interim” colleagues are highly valued; and there is much that one can accomplish from what can feel like a transitory appointment. I encourage you – along with all of our faculty colleagues - to embrace the opportunity you have right now to be part of Fairfield’s community and fully engage this year in work you find meaningful.

3. **socialize and enact principles for free-expression.** As you may recall, last year, the President and I charged a task-force of faculty with the establishment of a set of principles for free expression that was specific to Fairfield University and the current
culture in which we find ourselves. This task force worked diligently throughout the year and presented a draft set of principles to the President and I last May, which we in turn introduced to the Board of Trustees in June. The challenges ahead of us this year are to socialize those principles through a shared governance process that includes the whole of the General Faculty, to align our University-wide policies with these principles, and to enact what is means democratic society where exchange of ideas is free-flowing; differing opinions are debated and discussed openly with respect for the persons holding them; and scholars and learners of all types are invited to participate. In doing so, Fairfield University has the opportunity to become a beacon in what often feels like a dark and murky world.

4. **consider what it means to be a place of reconciliation for the Catholic church.** Fairfield University as a place of reconciliation was not an initiative that was on my radar as we closed the academic year and I shed the adjective “interim” from my title as Provost in late spring. However, when the President and our Vice President for Mission and Identity traveled to Bilbao for the first ever international meeting of Jesuit schools and colleges in mid-summer, they were given such a charge by the Superior General of the Society of Jesus. And as we see in the news this fall, there is good reason for that charge. As was the case with the crises surrounding immigration and DACA at this time last year, Fairfield University stands ready to take up this charge, in large part because of the good work coming out of our centers. Even as I speak, the Jesuits in our community along with over 40 spiritual directors associated with our Center for Ignatian Spirituality are meeting to discuss the crises in the Catholic church and their associated
responsibility as ministers; as you have seen in recent announcements, the Center for Catholic Studies has initiated a series of intellectual conversations – through the Presidential Seminar in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition - about Sex Abuse in the Catholic Church; and both the Center for Ignatian Spirituality and the Center for Catholic Studies are working collaboratively with Bishop Caggiano of the Bridgeport Diocese, with Sacred Heart University and with Fordham University to extend these ministry-related and intellectual conversations to the Catholic community beyond Fairfield University. And so, by facilitating the conversation, Fairfield University assumes its responsibility as a place of reconciliation. That is our institutional response, and I hope it can contribute to healing and serve as a model for other institutions of higher education. I struggle, however, when considering what our individual responses to this charge of reconciliation might be. Earlier this week I admitted my struggle in a conversation with a faculty member. He suggested to me that alongside these institutional and intellectual conversations, each of us in the Fairfield University community can contribute to a movement of reconciliation by simply being persons of integrity – as we stand before our students, as we address each other in our speeches, and as we encounter each other in our daily work – we can restore faith in the church, faith in higher education, and faith in society by being trustworthy in who we are and what we do.

So Fairfield University faculty, as we start the 2018-2019 academic year, we are on top. How do we come to be where we are? What does it mean to be here? And what is the path forward?
Through your on-going and full engagement in work, about which you are passionate and through which you draw meaning, we find ourselves in the privileged position of the opportunity to lead in trustworthy ways through uncertain times.

WORK, meaning and passion - dare I say LOVE? - and TRUST, these are themes you have heard from me before and ones you will hear again. WORK, TRUST and LOVE – this is what we the faculty at Fairfield University do and as I wrote in my message to you last week – “age quod agis” – do what you are doing. Thank you, Fairfield faculty for all that you do.